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SIR WILLIAM OSLER ON THE CLASSICS
(ESPECIALLY ARISTOTLE AND LUCRETIUS)

On May 16, 1919, Sir William Osler, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, addressed The Classical Association of England at its Annual Meeting for 1919, held in Oxford; he was, for 1918–1919, the President of the Association. His address, entitled The Old Humanities and the New Science, was published by John Murray (London. One shilling, net). The address is listed also among the publications of The American Classical League, and copies of it may be obtained from Professor West, at Princeton, at 20 cents each.

I am bound to say that from Parts I and II of the address (pages 3–18), few readers, whether classical or scientific (even as medically scientific, if I may be allowed to coin a word, as Sir William Osler himself), would derive much in the way of concrete suggestions, or find much to cherish in memory. Sir William Osler adds himself (17) to the long list of persons outside the classical field who have taken it upon themselves to inform classicists, unhesitatingly, in obiter dicta, that their methods of teaching the Classics are hopelessly wrong. Of course, he himself knows exactly how Greek should be taught (17):

> It passes my understanding how the more excellent way of Montaigne, of Milton, and of Locke should have been neglected until recently. Make the language an instrument to play with and to play with thoroughly, and recognize that except for the few in "Mods." and "Greats" it is superfluous to know how the instrument is constructed, or to dissect the neuro-muscular mechanism by which it is played. It is satisfactory to read that the Greek Curriculum Committee thinks "it is possible in a comparatively short time to acquire a really valuable knowledge of Greek, and to learn with accuracy and fair fluency some of the most important works in Greek literature". I am sure of it, if the teacher will go to school to Montaigne and feed fat against that old scoundrel Protagoras a well-earned grudge for inventing grammar . . . against which I have a medullary prejudice.

In Part III (pages 18–32), Sir William Osler makes a plea for the inclusion in the classical course (he is thinking, naturally, of the classical course in the English Universities) of works and authors that are now not to be found at all within the limits of that course. As one would expect, he is particularly disturbed by the absence from the course of works and writers within the field of science. One has heard like complaint often enough on this side of the Atlantic. Teachers of history, for example, have been known to complain because students came to their courses with training in Caesar, Cicero, Vergil, Horace, etc., but unable to read at sight a document in medieval Latin. Dr. McGiffert, the President of the Union Theological Seminary, New York City, told The New York Classical Club a year ago, and more recently The Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Liberal Studies, that the decay of the Classics in this country is directly traceable to erroneous methods of teaching the Classics, and to an erroneous curriculum—the curriculum being erroneous, apparently, in the fact that it did not contain elaborate training in the Latin and Greek of the Church Fathers (THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 12.168, 13.72). Such American criticism and such English criticism spring from blindness to the fact that the proper business of a Latin or a Greek course, for the average human being, is a study of the masterpieces of Greek and Latin literature, not preparation of students for some specialty to which few ever apply themselves. How many students of medicine or other sciences study, even in English, the works to which Sir William Osler refers? How many of the Clergy to-day are versed, by any mode of study, in the Church fathers? Professors of law bemoan the fact that courses in Roman law have few takers'. Again, *nisi animus magnopere me fallit*, such a course consisting largely of studies of Greek science and the Latin and Greek of the Church Fathers would be even more thoroughly detested by the average student of Latin and Greek than the critics believe courses in Latin and Greek to be at the present time.

But let us return to Sir William Osler's address. Whether we believe or not that the works of which he now proceeds to write should be included at all, or often, in a classical course, we can find much stimulus and help in what he says about certain Greek and Latin authors. The general burden of his remarks is summed up very well in a sentence on page 19: ". . . the sources of the new science that has made a new world are practically ignored". This idea he develops thus (19):

> Few "Greats" men, I fear, could tell why Hippocrates is a living force to-day, or why a modern scientific physician would feel more at home with Erasistratus and Herophilus at Alexandria, or with Galen at Pergamos, than at any period in our story up to, say, Harvey. Except as a delineator of character, what does the Oxford scholar know of Theophrastus, the founder of modern botany, and a living force to-day in one of the two departments of biology. . . .

On pages 20–23 Sir William Osler deals at length with what he characterizes (20) as "two instances of shocking neglect".

In biology Aristotle speaks for the first time the language of modern science, and indeed he seems to have been first and foremost a biologist, and his natural history studies influenced profoundly his sociology, his psychology, and his philosophy in general. The beginner may be sent now to Professor D'Arcy Wentworth Thomson's Herbert Spencer Lecture, 1913, and he must be indeed a dull and muddy-mettled rascal whose imagination is not fired by the enthusiastic—yet true—picture of the founder of modern biology, whose language is our language, whose methods and problems are our own, the man who knew a thousand varied forms of life, of plant, of bird, and animal, their outward structure, their metamorphosis, their early development; who studied the problems of heredity, of sex, of nutrition, of growth, of adaptation, and of the struggle for existence <see The Classical Weekly 5.57–58, 65–66>. And the senior student, if capable of appreciating a biological discovery, I advise to study the account by Johannes Müller (himself a pioneer in anatomy) of his rediscovery of Aristotle's remarkable discovery of a special mode of reproduction in one of the species of sharks. For 2,000 years the founder of the science of embryology had neither rival nor worthy follower. There is no reference, I believe, to the biological works in the Literae Humaniores papers for the past ten years, yet they form the very foundations of discoveries that have turned our philosophies topsy-turvy.

Nothing reveals the unfortunate break in Humanities more clearly than the treatment of the greatest Nature-poet in literature, a man who had "gazed on Nature's naked loveliness" unabashed, the man who united, as no one else has ever done, the "functions and temper and achievement of science and poetry" (Herford). The golden work of Lucretius is indeed recognized, and in Honour Moderations, Books I–III and V are set as one of seven alternatives in section D; and scattered through the "Greats" papers are set translations and snippets here and there; but anything like adequate consideration from the scientific side is to be sought in vain. Unmatched among the ancients or moderns is the vision by Lucretius of continuity in the workings of Nature—not less of ***Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis*** which so affrighted Pascal, than of "the long limitless age of days, the age of all time that has gone by"—

. . . longa diei
infinita aetas anteacti temporis omnis.

And it is in a Latin poet that we find up-to-date views of the origin of the world and of the origin of man. The description of the wild discordant storm of atoms (Book V) which led to the birth of the world might be transferred verbatim to the accounts of Poincaré or of Arrhenius of the growth of new celestial bodies in the Milky Way. What an insight into primitive man and the beginnings of civilization! He might have been a contemporary and friend, and doubtless was a tutor of Tylor. Book II, a manual of atomic physics with its marvellous conception of

. . . the flaring atom streams
and torrent of her myriad universe,

can only be read appreciatively by pupils of Roentgen or of J. J. Thompson. The ring theory of magnetism advanced in Book VI has been reproduced of late by Parsons, whose magnetons rotating as rings at high speed have the form and effect with which this disciple of Democritus clothes his magnetic physics.

And may I here enter a protest? Of love-philtres that produce insanity we may read the truth in a chapter of that most pleasant manual of erotology, the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Of insanity of any type that leaves a mind capable in lucid intervals of writing such verses as *De Rerum Natura* we know nothing. The sole value of the myth is its causal association with the poem of Tennyson. Only exsuccous dons who have never known the wiles and ways of the younger Aphrodite would take the intensity of the feeling in Book IV as witness of anything but an accident which may happen to the wisest of the wise, when enthralled by Vivien or some dark lady of the Sonnets!

To one or two other matters in the pamphlet I venture, in conclusion, to direct attention. One is to be found in the paragraph (23–24) in which Sir William Osler discusses briefly the method of science, and comments on the fact that many important discoveries in pure science were made by men who had no other motives than a search for knowledge of Nature's laws, who were, in a word, absolutely disinterested, with no thought of the practical. I may note that, when they were doing this, they were working on the same high level as the classical scholar who devotes himself to research. I will take the space to quote what is said of the method of science (23–24):

> Science has been defined as the habit or faculty of observation. By such the child grows in knowledge, and in its daily exercise an adult lives and moves. Only a quantitative difference makes observation scientific—accuracy—in that way alone do we discover things as they really are. This is the essence of Plato's definition of science as "the discovery of things as they really are", whether in the heavens above, in the earth beneath, or in the observer himself. As a mental operation, the scientific method is equally applicable to deciphering a bit of Beneventan script, to the analysis of the evidence of the Commission on Coal-mines, a study of the mechanism of the nose-dive, or of the colour-scheme in tiger-beetles.

Finally, I noted with great interest the warning, on pages 24 and 27, against specialism in science. The indictment here of workers in science is as severe as any indictment ever drawn against classicists:

> The extraordinary development of modern science may be her undoing. Specialism, now a necessity, has fragmented the specialties themselves in a way that makes the outlook hazardous. The workers lose all sense of proportion in a maze of minutiae. Everywhere men are in small coteries intensely absorbed in subjects of deep interest, but of very limited scope. Chemistry, a century ago an appanage of the Chair of Medicine or even of Divinity, has now a dozen departments, each with its laboratory and literature, sometimes its own society. Applying themselves early to research, young men get into backwaters far from the main stream. . . .
>
> From over-specialization scientific men are in a more parlous state than are the Humanists from neglect of classical tradition. The salvation of science lies in a recognition of a new philosophy—the *scientia scientiarum*, of which Plato speaks. "Now when all these studies reach the point of intercommunion and connection with one another and come to be considered in their mutual affinities, then I think, and not till then, will the pursuit of them have a value".

C. K.